

Spotlight

Conversations with Alumni

Back to Basics: Planning in the Peace Corps, Rwanda

Michael Heater

Master in City and Regional Planning, Cal Poly, 2013

Before studying planning, Michael worked as a professional photographer, primarily in the newspaper industry. He served as a Peace Corps volunteer from 2014-2016 in Rwanda with his wife. He is now working as a Realty Specialist with the General Services Administration. He and his wife currently live in Philadelphia with their adopted Rwandan cat. Check out Michael's article with Brian Harrington "Creating more than a Snapshot: Photography for Planning and Design", in FOCUS 9 (2012).

Armed with a Masters in City and Regional Planning, I found myself in neither a city or a region, but in an isolated village in the western mountains of Rwanda. I was a Peace Corps Volunteer. I graduated with a Master degree in City & Regional Planning at Cal Poly in 2013. A year later I found myself travelling 7,000 miles to what the Peace Corps calls "the toughest job you'll ever love."

At the time, I didn't know if I made one of the best decisions of my life or the dumbest. I was leaving behind the SLO lifestyle—wineries, beaches, beautiful hiking trails, as well as running water, electricity, internet and Jamba Juice. But what I did know is that I wanted to use my new set of planning skills in areas without a planning structure where the public planning process is foreign.

The U.S. Peace Corps is a government program where volunteers work for two years (24 months of service along with three months of intense cultural and language training) immersing themselves in a community abroad by living alongside the

nationals of their host country and making a salary that meets basic needs. To date, there are over 7,000 Peace Corps volunteers serving in 65 countries around the world.

My country of service, Rwanda, is a small but dense country (the second densest in Africa) about the size of Maryland and has a population of 12 million, double that of Maryland. Located just a few degrees south of the equator and highly elevated, its geography is dominated by green mountains in the west and savanna in the east and dotted with lakes throughout the country. Rwanda's economy is based on subsistence agriculture. According to the World Bank, Rwanda's agriculture makes up nearly 40% of the gross domestic product, accounts for 80% of the country's employment and provides 90% of the country's food needs. Its exports depend on coffee and tea crops although the tourism industry is increasing: it is one of only three countries where tourists can visit mountain gorillas in their natural habitat.

The country has transformed itself since the 1994 genocide that left more than 800,000 people dead. Today, Rwanda is secure and stable and has gone through significant economic and social changes making the country a model in development. Rwanda has become a major participant in intra-regional trade among the East African Community.

After three months of rigorous training in the east of Rwanda, my wife and I were placed in a rural village called Murunda in the mountainous west. Murunda is located on top of one of the many picturesque hills of the country, covered in banana trees and roaming goats and cows. Our house was sandwiched between the boarding school that I taught at and the public school where my wife worked. It was modest, with a pit latrine, no running water but rather consistent electricity. We cooked on a charcoal stove. Life was simple, and rains came often.

Michael teaching English through a lesson of Feelings.





The village of Murunda, where Michael and his wife GraceAnne worked as Peace Corps volunteers.



A weekly street market in a neighboring village.

A religious ceremony at the Murunda soccer field. Example of multi-purpose use of public space.



Our primary assignment was to teach English to high school students. I taught 10th grade, and my class size was small in comparison to other volunteers, between 15-40 students. The students had pens and notebooks, and the teachers had chalk. We had no books, and no way of printing anything - notes, diagrams, passages, and tests are all written on the board. If there was something we wanted to use for our classes, we would write it on a rice sack so we didn't have to copy it six times. We could only dream about handouts and projectors.

I didn't join the Peace Corps just to teach English; I wanted to put my planning degree to good use. But I wondered how I could plan without the comforts of AutoCAD or SketchUp. I had to ditch the computer and get back to the basics—talking to people, listening to their challenges and their visions of the future. Community-based planning in Peace Corps simply means using a bottom-up approach. A volunteer usually takes at least a year to start even the smallest of projects. Time is needed to understand the community and build relationships.

The Peace Corps approach to development is similar to lessons learned during Cal Poly Community Planning Studio. Peace Corps volunteers get training on the principles of Participatory Analysis for Community Action, or PACA as it is known. PACA is a guidebook for planning, managing, and evaluating community development. The core idea of PACA is capacity-building. Priorities of development are identified by the individual members of the community. This approach empowers local people to be the decision-makers, use their own resources, and help develop the skills to improve their lives.

A village bar also served as the community center. It was a respectable place that served warm beer and goat meat. Local government officials, business owners, headmasters, priests, teachers, and farmers all frequented the place. With a mediocre understanding of Kinyarwanda, the language of Rwanda, and a very helpful counterpart, I chatted with patrons about their visions for a future Murunda. Ideas were tossed around, some more practical than other (I couldn't justify buying a photocopier and then using the proceeds from copies to buy chickens), but enough for me to create a Needs Assessment with priority ranking. These informal discussions helped me collaborate with the village leaders and determine the desires, wants, and needs of the community.

The idea that we settled on, one that generated excitement from the start, was to improve the community basketball and volleyball courts. We agreed that sports are very important to the health and well-being of people, so we identified and prioritized this area as one that could solve a pressing need.

The basketball and volleyball courts were in poor condition before the renovation. Both of the courts were made of dirt

and had exposed brick to mark the lines on the court, which players would often trip over. The volleyball net was torn in many places and the basketball backboard was made of wood and needed to be replaced almost as soon as a new one was put in. We wanted to focus on basketball and volleyball courts to promote healthy living, bring economic development to the village through tournaments, to give another sports alternative than soccer, and to provide a public space for people to gather.

I worked closely with a Rwandan counterpart, and we brought together multiple community and government stakeholders from the beginning of the process. Since Rwandan culture is very respectful of authority, we needed permission from several key stakeholders of Murunda: local government officials, the head priest, two school headmasters, and the local bar owner who served as the community leader. These people helped select the local contractor who would procure the materials, recruit the labor, and design and build the project. We evaluated project designs, created and managed a realistic project timeline, acquired the necessary permits and approvals, received a grant, supervised the construction of the project as well as managed all project funds. I focused on capacity building and project sustainability, ideas I learned while at Cal Poly.

To demonstrate community ownership and initiation of a Peace Corps grant project, as well as to enhance the long-term sustainability of the project, the community must contribute a minimum of 25 percent of the total project cost. This contribution can include the costs of manual labor and transportation of materials as well as direct contributions of raw materials or cash. In Murunda, the community donated sand and stones and even helped with the labor, which had the added benefit of generating needed income for local families.

By involving the community at the very beginning of the process, we were able to identify how they could contribute to the project. A fully engaged community partner is a crucial element to any successful project and signifies the first step in promoting community ownership of the activity. If the community had not been behind it, the sustainability of the project could come into question.

Once I had the grant funds, the community stakeholders wanted to start the project three months ahead of schedule. The first phase of the project was to dig up the current dirt volleyball and basketball courts, remove any exposed bricks, and widen the courts on all sides. During the second phase, community members carried stones on their heads from the riverbed at the bottom of the mountain up to the top for the foundation of the courts. In the third phase, community members collected and carried sand and gravel (also on their heads from the bottom to the top of the mountain), and the court was cemented to



The community laying the hand stones as the foundation for the basket/volleyball court.



Skilled laborers pouring concrete on top of the stones.

The villagers gathered for a game in the recently finished court.



complete the foundation. Finally, skilled laborers painted and erected poles and nets on the courts.

The community as a whole benefitted from this project, just as the community as a whole contributed to it. The users of Murunda sports field include the students and teachers, the staff at the Murunda Hospital, and the community members in general, as well as people from other villages. Even after our biggest challenge, when the project construction was suspended due to a lack of cement to finish the surface of the court, the community came together, and Murunda's School Association stepped in to fund the remaining cost.

Community members and organizations acquired important new skills while planning and implementing this project. The outside technical assistance that was brought in, the process of purchasing materials, the experience gained in design and construction, and the entire process of planning and monitoring this project assisted individuals in attaining skills and knowledge necessary to improve their standard of living (as well as the enjoyment of playing and watching matches!).

Development is considered sustainable when it is able to continue on its own without outside support. According to Peace Corps, sustainable development is a process in which men and women learn to build on their own strengths, to take charge of their lives, and to address their expressed needs. To address sustainability of the sports courts, we created a memorandum of understanding with the responsibilities of each stakeholder. The local government agreed to provide support in the form of *umuganda* —a monthly government program involving all citizens in nation-wide community service that contributes to the overall development of Rwanda. *Umuganda* takes place on the last Saturday of each month and lasts for about three hours. The Murunda parish agreed to continue to provide sports equipment, as it had for years. The schools agreed to use the youth in the community to maintain

the property and serve as advocates for the grounds. Murunda was able to host more district sports tournaments that brought in more economic activity as well as general sociability to the area. With this increased activity, the community and local government were compelled to support the maintenance of the sports fields.

Once the courts were completed, people used them to play basketball and volleyball from 6 am to 6 pm – all available daylight hours. The biggest change I noticed was that now, by having the concrete base, people were allowed to play soon after a rain. Before, especially during the rainy season, the court would be full of mud and useless for games. Now, pickup games can start immediately after a storm.

What an outsider might see as just a sports court, the locals see as a new opportunity. When the courts aren't being used for sports, students practice traditional dance on the cemented surface, young primary students are taught lessons through games, and the community hosts meetings and general gatherings. Recently, the court started to serve as a drone delivery point for emergency medicine supplies, like blood, to the Murunda hospital!

This community development project demonstrated the importance of involving the end users in planning, design, and construction of the project. Community ownership can only be truly successful by including local leaders and the public throughout the process.

Rwanda may have lacked technology and resources easily found in the US. However, the hands-on, learn-by-doing education I received through the City & Regional Planning program at Cal Poly helped me to navigate a planning project, even in a developing country.

The Peace Corps Mission is to promote world peace and friendship by fulfilling three goals:

- *To help the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women;*
- *To help promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served;*
- *To help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans.*

When establishing the Peace Corps in 1961, President John F. Kennedy described the volunteer experience as: "Life in the Peace Corps will not be easy. There will be no salary and allowances will be at a level sufficient only to maintain health and meet basic needs. Men and women will be expected to work and live alongside the nationals of the country in which they are stationed – doing the same work, eating the same food, talking the same language."